***Mayans Today***

**1 • INTRODUCTION**

Today's Maya are descended from one of the great civilizations of the Americas. They live in the same regions of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras as their ancestors and retain many of their ancient traditions. Mayan history reaches back some 4,000 years to what is called the Preclassic period, when civilization first began in Central America. However, it was during what came to be known as the Classic period—from roughly AD 250 to 900—that Mayan culture reached its peak and the Maya achieved their celebrated advances in architecture, mathematics, agriculture, astronomy, art, and other areas.

They built spectacular temples and palaces, developed several calendars—including one reaching back to 13 August, 3114 BC —and evolved a numerical system capable of recording a number that today would be expressed as 142 followed by 36 zeros. They developed a complex system of writing and, beginning in 50 BC, were the first people in the Western hemisphere to keep written historical records. Around AD 900 the construction of buildings and stelae—stone slabs inscribed with names and dates—ceased abruptly, and the advanced lowland civilization of the Maya collapsed, creating a mystery that has fascinated scholars for many years. Possible causes that have been proposed include warfare, drought, famine, and disease.

The Spanish campaign to subdue the Maya and conquer their lands began around 1520 and ended nearly 200 years later when Tayasal, the last remaining Mayan region (in present-day Guatemala), fell to the conquistadors in 1697. The Spanish seized Mayan lands and enslaved their populations, sending many to labor in the mines of northern Mexico. In addition, thousands of Maya died of diseases spread by the Europeans, especially smallpox. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Central American lands won their independence from Spain, but the lives of the Maya did not improve. They labored on vast tobacco, sugarcane, and henequen plantations, in virtual slavery, enforced by their continuing debt to the landowners. In the Yucatán, many joined in a protracted rebellion called the Caste War that lasted from 1847 to 1901.

After the revolution of 1910, the Maya in Mexico gained increased legal rights and better educational and job opportunities. However, a steep drop in world prices for henequen (the "green gold" from which twine was made) turned the Yucatán from one of Mexico's richest regions to one of its poorest. In Guatemala, the disenfranchisement and poverty of the Maya, comprising roughly half the population, continued unchanged into the twentieth century. Since the 1970s, political violence has forced many Maya to flee to Mexico, where they remain as refugees. In Chiapas, Maya of the Tzeltal and Tzotzil tribes took part in the Zapatista uprising of January 1994.

**2 • LOCATION**

The modern Maya live in southeastern Mexico and northern Central America, including Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. Altogether, their homelands cover an area of approximately 125,000 square miles (323,750 square kilometers) with a varied terrain that encompasses both northern lowlands and southern highlands. Volcanic mountains dominate the highlands. The fertile soil of the highland valleys supports the largest segment of the Maya population. While many Maya have settled in cities, particularly Merida and Cancún, and adopted an urban lifestyle, most remain rural dwellers.

Reliable figures for the total number of Maya are unavailable. Estimates range upward from 4 million. The true figure is probably between 8 and 10 million, including about half of Guatemala's total population of 10 million, close to 2 million Maya in the Mexican Yucatán, and additional numbers in Mexico's Chiapas state, as well as Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. Among the larger individual groups are about 750,000 Quiché (K'iche') in the midwestern highlands of Guatemala; 445,000 or more Cakchiquel in several Guatemalan departments (provinces); and over 500,000 Mam in southwestern Guatemala and southeastern Chiapas.

**3 • LANGUAGE**

Most Maya today speak Spanish. The two Mayan languages of the Classic period, Yucatecan and Cholan, have subdivided into about thirty separate languages, some of which are not mutually intelligible. The most widely spoken are Mam, Quiché, Kekchí, and Cakchiquel. Advocates of Mayan cultural autonomy protest against the relegation of their indigenous languages to limited use, often in remote rural areas, while Spanish remains the language of government, education, the church, and the media.

**4 • FOOD**

The Maya generally eat three meals a day: breakfast *(el desayuno),* lunch *(la comida),* and supper *(la cena).* Corn, the most important food of their ancestors, remains the central ingredient in their diet today and is used to make tortillas or tamales. After corn, beans *(frijoles)* are the most basic staple, served boiled, fried, or refried. Soups, many of them actually thick stews, form a large part of the Mayan diet. One of the most popular is lime soup *(sopa de lima),* made from chicken, limes, and a variety of spices.

Poultry forms the basis of many meals, either turkey, which is native to the region, or chicken, which was introduced by the Spanish. Plentiful seafood caught on the coasts of the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico is also an important part of the diet. The Yucatán is known for its *ceviche,* a cold dish made with fish prepared with an acidic marinade (usually lime juice), served with onions, chiles, and cilantro. Popular desserts include flan (a custard introduced by the Spanish) and *Torta del Cielo* (Heavenly Cake), a cake made with rum, almonds, and ten eggs that is served at weddings and other special occasions.

One of the best-known foods of the Maya is *Cochinita Pibil*, a pork dish that dates back to pre-Columbian times, when it was made from wild boar cooked in a coal-filled pit. Domesticated pigs, introduced by the Spanish, have replaced the boar, but the dish is prepared with the same seasonings as it was in the past.

**5 • SPORTS and RECREATION**

The ancient Maya played hip-ball, a game that involved keeping a hard rubber ball aloft with any part of the body other than the hands, head, or feet. In some regions, the ball had to be hit through a set of stone rings. Soccer is popular among the Maya of today.

Sunday afternoons after church are the most popular time for recreation. Most businesses are closed, and many people stroll the village streets or relax in local parks. Popular forms of musical entertainment include marimba teams and mariachi bands.